

By the Kansas Historical Society

The Progressive Movement's Impact on Government and Election Reform

The turn of the 20th century was a time of unrest and reform in the United States. The new Progressive Movement continued making changes the Populists had begun. These changes were said to be "progress." People began to think differently about the role of government in citizens' lives. State laws passed between 1904 and 1912 reflect the changes made by Kansas Progressives. In the process, Kansas led the way to national change.

What was the problem?

Voters in Kansas had limited choices. Politicians and party leaders nominated people for a general election. U.S. senators were selected by the Kansas Legislature, not by Kansas voters. Some politicians managed the government for their own gain. Kansans wanted to stop these dishonest politicians. They wanted to make state government work for the people, not for the politicians.



What was the solution?

The goals for the Progressive Movement focused on government and election reform:

- Run the government like a business.
- Allow direct election of U.S. senators instead of having senators chosen by the members of the state legislature.
- Create a direct primary election so Kansans could choose their political party's candidates for the general election.

The Progressive Movement in Kansas successfully changed the way government was run by changing the way elections were run. A new law was passed in 1908 that gave power to the people, not the politicians. The law created a statewide primary election to be held before each general election. A primary election allows many candidates to run for office. From these candidates, voters could select one person for each office to represent their political party to run in the general election. The primary election would also include candidates who were nominated to run for the U.S. Senate. In 1908, for the first time, Kansans held a primary election.

A 1909 law amended the 1908 law that created the direct primary election. It explained specifically when primary elections would be held, in what order candidate names were to be listed, how the ballots were to be written, and how many votes a candidate had to receive to move to the general election.

How did Kansas lead the way to national change?

Joseph Bristow from Kansas was one of the U.S. senators elected through the new primary process. In 1911 he introduced an amendment to the U.S. Constitution (changing the way all U.S. senators would be elected to office). Through this action, Kansas led the way to the passage of the 17th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1913.

